

Differentiated Learning Innovation in Accommodating Students' Learning Needs at Daarul Aitam Middle School Palembang

Depi Elpiyanti¹, Reva Valianti², Heri Setianto²

¹SMP Daarul Aitam Palembang, ²Universitas PGRI Palembang
e-mail: citrabusana26@gmail.com

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Abstract: This study aimed to analyze innovations in differentiated instruction for accommodating students' learning needs in Social Studies at SMP Daarul Aitam Palembang. A qualitative case study approach was employed involving one Social Studies teacher and 64 eighth-grade students selected through purposive sampling because they had implemented differentiated instruction under the Merdeka Curriculum. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation and analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña interactive model. The findings indicate that diagnostic assessment serves as the foundation for designing differentiated content, processes, products, and learning environments according to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. The implementation of differentiated instruction increased students' participation, engagement, confidence, and learning motivation while creating a more inclusive and student-centered classroom environment. This study contributes to educational management and instructional innovation by demonstrating that diagnostic assessment is not merely an assessment tool but also a strategic basis for designing adaptive learning within the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Keywords: *differentiated instruction, diagnostic assessment, Merdeka curriculum*

A. Introduction

Educational developments in the 21st century call for a shift in perspective regarding learning. Learning is no longer centered on the teacher as the primary source of information, but must be centered on the students as the primary agents in the learning process (Mahendra et al., 2023). Today's education system emphasizes not only mastery of subject matter but also the development of critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration skills (the 4Cs) needed to tackle increasingly complex life challenges (Fajri, 2025; Nahar & Machado, 2025). Therefore, the learning process must be designed flexibly and tailored to the diverse needs and characteristics of students. Consequently, adaptive and learner-centered learning provides equal opportunities for every learner to optimally develop their potential, creativity, and competencies in accordance with their individual learning needs (Ikhsan&Setiawan, 2025; Kryshtanovych et al., 2024).

Although previous studies have consistently reported the positive effects of differentiated instruction on student engagement and learning outcomes, most have emphasized instructional effectiveness rather than explaining how diagnostic assessment systematically guides instructional decision-making. Moreover, empirical evidence regarding differentiated instruction innovation in junior high school Social Studies within the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum remains limited. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by examining how diagnostic assessment is translated into differentiated instructional practices that accommodate students' diverse learning needs.

Efforts to implement student-centered learning in Indonesia are being carried out through the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. This curriculum gives teachers greater flexibility to design lessons tailored to the needs, characteristics, and abilities of their students (Hunaepi & Suharta, 2024). Through the Merdeka Curriculum, students are placed at the center of the learning process, while teachers serve as facilitators who help students develop their potential and abilities to the fullest (Silalahi, 2025). In addition, the implementation of this curriculum also requires a learning process that is more contextual, meaningful, and inclusive, and that is capable of accommodating the diverse learning needs of students (Waly et al., 2021; Suwandi et al., 2023; Atmojo et al., 2024).

One approach that aligns with the principle of differentiated instruction in the Merdeka Curriculum is a learning approach designed to tailor the learning process to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Wahyuningsari et al., 2022). In practice, teachers can adapt various aspects of the learning process, such as the material presented (content), the learning methods (process), the expected outcomes (products), and the learning environment, to suit the needs and learning styles of each student. This approach is important because students inherently possess different abilities, backgrounds, interests, and learning needs, so they cannot be treated with the same learning strategies (Mahfudz, 2023).

The diversity of students' characteristics is one of the challenges teachers face in the learning process. Each student differs in academic ability, interest in learning, learning style, and learning experience, which means their learning needs also vary (Lisnawati et al., 2023). If these differences are not properly addressed, some students may struggle to understand the material, become less engaged in learning activities, and even experience low motivation

to learn. Therefore, teachers need to implement teaching strategies that can accommodate or adapt to students' learning needs so that learning activities can be more effective and equitable for all students (Derici & Susanti, 2023).

Various studies show that differentiated instruction can be one solution for accommodating students' diverse learning needs. Handiyani & Muhtar (2022) explains that differentiated instruction can increase student engagement in the learning process because students are given the opportunity to learn in ways that align with their individual characteristics. These findings suggest that differentiated instruction serves not only as a teaching strategy but also as a means of creating a more inclusive and truly student-centered learning environment (Kriza et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, in practice schools still face various challenges. Teacher-centered instruction is still common, so the learning process does not yet fully take into account the diverse characteristics of students (Purwowododo & Zaini, 2023). As a result, instruction often follows the same approach for all students without much adaptation to their individual needs and abilities. This situation can lead to low achievement and limit their opportunities to develop their full potential (Purwowododo & Zaini, 2023).

This issue also arises in Social Studies classes, a subject that explores various social phenomena in society and actually requires students' active participation in the learning process. However, in practice, Social Studies classes are still often conducted in a one-way manner, where teachers primarily deliver the material and students mostly memorize concepts (Hermanto, 2024). This situation results in students being less actively engaged in learning; consequently, they are less willing to express their opinions and fail to take full advantage of opportunities to develop their critical

thinking skills. Based on the results of initial observations conducted at SMP Daarul Aitam Palembang, there are still students who lack confidence in expressing their opinions, are less active in group discussions, and have difficulty understanding the material. In addition, the learning process has not yet been fully adapted to the diverse learning needs of students, so student engagement in learning has not been optimal.

Various previous studies have shown that differentiated instruction has a positive impact on both the learning process and student outcomes (Kamalia, 2023) Thus, differentiated instruction allows teachers to tailor their teaching to the needs of their students. According to Pozas et al.(2021) the learning process becomes more effective through the implementation of differentiated instruction, which increases student engagement in learning, while the research findings Nuriyani et al.(2023) dan Sutrisno et al.(2023) also demonstrated that differentiated instruction can enhance students' engagement and creativity in learning. Furthermore Winahyu et al.(2024) found that differentiated instruction influences improvements in student learning outcomes, while Saputra & Susilowati (2023) emonstrated that differentiated instruction methods can support improvements in the quality of learning within the context of 21st-century education. Foo (2025) emonstrated that differentiated instruction methods can support improvements in the quality of learning within the context of 21st-century education.

Although various studies have demonstrated the benefits of differentiated instruction, most research still focuses on its general application and on improving student learning outcomes (Tamara et al., 2024). Meanwhile, research specifically addressing the application of differentiated instruction innovations in social studies at the junior high school level remains relatively limited. Furthermore, there is still little research that explains in depth how

differentiated instruction is applied to accommodate students' learning needs in the context of social studies under the Merdeka Curriculum.

Given these circumstances, this study offers a novel perspective on the implementation of differentiated instruction to accommodate students' learning needs in social studies at SMP Daarul Aitam in Palembang. This study not only describes how differentiated instruction is implemented but also analyzes the various forms of innovation employed by teachers to adapt instruction to students' learning needs. Thus, this study aims to analyze the implementation of differentiated instruction innovations in accommodating students' learning needs in Social Studies at SMP Daarul Aitam Palembang.

B. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using a descriptive research design in the form of a case study. This approach was chosen because, through observation, the researcher identified an intriguing phenomenon worthy of investigation: the implementation of differentiated instruction to accommodate students' learning needs in Social Studies. Through the qualitative approach, the researcher can gain a deep understanding of how differentiated instruction is applied in the learning process. This approach allows the researcher to directly observe the experiences, activities, and interactions that occur during the learning process, thereby providing a more complete picture of the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Creswell, 2021; Setiyani et al., 2026)).

The study was conducted at SMP Daarul Aitam Palembang on May 20, 2026. The research subjects consisted of 64 eighth-grade students and the social studies teacher directly involved in the teaching process. Subject selection was conducted purposively

because eighth-grade students had already implemented differentiated instruction in social studies, making them more suitable for the research focus. Through this subject selection, the researcher was able to obtain more in-depth information from parties with experience and understanding regarding the implementation of differentiated instruction (Atmojo et al., 2024).

Research data was collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted during the learning process to determine how differentiated instruction was implemented in Social Studies, including adjustments to content, the learning process, learning products, and student engagement during learning activities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students to explore their experiences during differentiated instruction, understand their responses to the implemented approach, and identify various challenges encountered during the learning process. In addition, documentation was used to supplement and strengthen the research data. The documents analyzed included instructional materials, subject assessment results, teaching modules, student worksheets (LKPD), assignment results, and documentation of learning activities. The use of these various data sources aimed to provide a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the implementation of differentiated instruction, which was the focus of the research (Fauzia & Ramadan, 2023).

Participants were selected purposively because they had direct experience in implementing differentiated instruction in Social Studies under the Merdeka Curriculum. Prior to data collection, participants voluntarily agreed to participate and were informed about the research objectives. Data trustworthiness was established through source triangulation, methodological triangulation, prolonged engagement, and member checking. Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and

Saldaña consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing.

The research data were analyzed in stages based on the model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions (Miles et al., 2020). During the data reduction phase, researchers select, categorize, and simplify the data obtained from observations, interviews, and documentation. The data is then presented in narrative form to make it easier to understand and analyze. The final step is drawing conclusions, which involves identifying relationships among the data, identifying emerging findings, and interpreting findings relevant to the research data.

Data validity was established through source triangulation and data triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from students, observation results, and learning documents (Susanto & Jailani, 2023; Miles et al., 2014). Meanwhile, methodological triangulation is conducted by comparing the results of observations, interviews, and documentation regarding the same phenomenon (Nurfajriani et al., 2024). The application of triangulation aims to ensure that the data obtained is truly accurate and reliable. Thus, the research findings possess a level of credibility that is scientifically accountable (Creswell & Creswell, 2021).

C. Results and Discussion

This study aims to describe and analyze the implementation of differentiated learning innovations in accommodating students' learning needs in the Social Studies subject at SMP Daarul Aitam Palembang. Based on the results of observations, interviews, and documentation analyzed using Braun & Clarke (2021), thematic analysis, four main themes were identified, namely: (1) assessment

as the foundation of differentiated instruction; (2) the implementation of differentiation in content, process, products, and the learning environment; (3) the impact of differentiated instruction on student participation and engagement; and (4) innovations in differentiated instruction in Social Studies.

These four themes demonstrate that differentiated instruction is not only a teaching strategy but also a pedagogical approach that supports a more adaptive and learner-centered implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (Smale Jacobse et al., 2020; Tomlinson, 2021)

Diagnostic Assessment

Before instructional activities begin, a cognitive assessment is conducted to serve as the foundation for differentiated instruction. Research findings indicate that social studies teachers at SMP Daarul Aitam Palembang conduct diagnostic and non-cognitive assessments to gather information regarding students' readiness to learn, prior knowledge, interests, and learning profiles. Cognitive assessments are conducted through pre-instructional tests, while non-cognitive assessments are conducted through observation, brief interviews, and learning interest questionnaires.

These findings indicate that diagnostic assessments not only serve as a tool for identifying students' initial abilities but also form the primary basis for designing instruction tailored to students' characteristics. This practice aligns with the Merdeka Curriculum policy, which positions diagnostic assessments as the first step in realizing student-centered learning (Kementerian Pendidikan Riset, dan Teknologi, 2022). The results of this study also reinforce the findings of Diarera & Budiarti (2024) who explain that mapping learning needs through diagnostic assessments enables teachers to develop differentiation strategies more effectively, thereby making

learning more inclusive and responsive to student diversity. Recent research by (Yanre et al., 2025) emphasizes that formative assessments conducted at the beginning of instruction provide crucial information about the gap between initial abilities and learning objectives, allowing teachers to design appropriate interventions.

Based on the assessment results, teachers group students according to their level of readiness, interests, and learning profiles. This process helps teachers determine the type of learning support each student requires. This situation indicates a shift in the learning paradigm from teacher-centered learning toward student-centered learning. Teachers no longer treat all students the same but instead tailor instruction to each student's individual learning needs. These findings are consistent with a study (Mahfudz, 2023) which states that the effectiveness of differentiated instruction is largely determined by teachers' ability to understand students' characteristics through ongoing assessment. Furthermore, studies by (Lestari et al., 2024) dan (Pozas et al., 2021a) indicate that teachers' competence in conducting diagnostic assessments is positively

Implementation of Differentiation in Content, Process, Product, and Learning Environment

Research findings indicate that teachers implement instructional differentiation through four main aspects: differentiation in content, process, product, and learning environment. Content differentiation is carried out by providing diverse learning resources, such as textbooks, PowerPoint presentations, articles, worksheets, infographics (concept maps, atlases, historical documents, or other relevant reading materials), instructional videos, and social studies case studies—textbooks, articles, infographics, and instructional videos tailored to students'

readiness levels, which is also consistent with research (Fitriani, 2025). Students with higher academic abilities are provided with enrichment materials that require more in-depth analytical skills, while students who are still struggling academically are given simpler, context-based materials.

The findings indicate that teachers strive to create equal learning opportunities for all students. According to (Pozas et al., 2021a), content differentiation allows students to receive material appropriate to their level of readiness, thereby making the learning process more effective and meaningful. In the context of social studies education, Content differentiation is important because social studies materials vary in complexity and require different levels of critical thinking skills from each student (Suwandi et al., 2023). Penelitian oleh Syafei (2025) also confirms that providing varied content can improve learning accessibility for students with diverse ability levels.

In terms of process differentiation, teachers employ various instructional strategies such as group discussions, case studies, project-based learning, presentations, social simulations, and educational games. This variety of strategies provides students with the opportunity to learn in ways that align with their individual characteristics and learning styles. Observations indicate that students become more active in asking questions, engaging in discussions, and expressing their opinions when given the opportunity to learn through methods that match their preferences.

These findings support the results of a study (Herwina, 2021) which states that process differentiation can increase student motivation and engagement because they receive learning experiences that are better suited to their individual needs and learning styles. Additionally, research indicates that flexible learning strategies can encourage students to participate more

actively in the learning process and foster better classroom interaction. Research by (Diarera & Budiarti, 2024) also states that carefully designed instructional differentiation can reduce disparities in learning outcomes among students.

In terms of product differentiation, teachers give students the freedom to demonstrate their understanding through various types of work based on their individual abilities and creativity. Students are given the option to create posters, simple videos, digital presentations, infographics, or concept maps according to their individual interests and abilities. The freedom to choose the form of learning tasks has been shown to increase students' motivation and self-confidence, as they can demonstrate their learning outcomes in the way that best suits their individual abilities. This is consistent with research (Gymnastiar, 2024) which shows that product differentiation provides students with the opportunity to express their understanding in a more creative way that is true to themselves.

Meanwhile, the learning environment is differentiated by organizing the classroom flexibly, forming diverse groups, and creating a safe and comfortable learning atmosphere. This inclusive environment allows students to participate actively without fear of making mistakes. These findings are consistent with research (Budianto, 2023) which emphasizes that an inclusive learning environment is one of the key requirements for achieving quality and equitable education. Research by (Fairus et al., 2024) also emphasized the importance of creating a classroom environment that values diversity as the foundation for equitable learning for all students.

The Impact of Differentiated Instruction on Student Participation and Engagement

The research findings indicate that the implementation of differentiated instruction has a positive impact on students' learning activities. Most students became more willing to express their opinions and participated more actively in group discussions; additionally, students also displayed greater confidence when presenting their work in front of the class. They also appeared more enthusiastic about participating in lessons compared to before the implementation of differentiated instruction.

This increase in engagement can be explained by Self-Determination Theory as developed by Susanti et al.(2025) . This theory explains that students' intrinsic motivation develops when their needs for competence, autonomy, and social relatedness are met. In this study, these needs were met through the provision of learning choices, opportunities to demonstrate abilities in line with their potential, and collaborative activities that encouraged interaction among students. These findings are supported by research by Nurjadid et al., (2025) which indicates that support for students' individuality is positively associated with their cognitive and affective engagement.

The results of this study are consistent with those of a previous study Purwowododo & Zaini (2023) which explains that student engagement encompasses behavioral, emotional, and cognitive aspects. These three aspects were observed to improve after differentiated instruction was implemented. Specifically, students became more active in social studies learning because they felt the material being taught aligned with their needs and abilities. Research by Pasaribu et al.(2024) also confirms that student engagement is a crucial factor that significantly influences their academic success as well as their social and emotional development. In the context of social studies learning, engagement is a key finding because this subject demands critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills. .

In social studies education, increasing student engagement is a key finding because social studies requires critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and social problem-solving skills. This finding is also consistent with the results of a study by Yusuf et al.(2025) which emphasizes that effective social studies learning must be contextual, reflective, and student-centered. Additionally, Saraswati et al.(2026) state that differentiated instruction strategies can help develop students' higher-order thinking skills more evenly. state that differentiated instruction strategies can help develop students' higher-order thinking skills more evenly.

Innovations in Differentiated Instruction in Social Studies Education

An interesting finding in this study is the presence of instructional innovations implemented by teachers through the use of digital technology and the development of more adaptive instructional materials. Teachers utilize interactive videos, digital quizzes, and tiered student worksheets (LKPD) tailored to the results of diagnostic assessments. Additionally, students are given the opportunity to help determine the themes of learning projects, thereby fostering a greater sense of ownership and engagement in the learning process.

This innovation demonstrates that differentiated instruction is not only about varying teaching methods but also about teachers' ability to design learning experiences tailored to students' needs. This finding aligns with the research by Samho & Princessa (2025) and the development of a deep learning-based curriculum (Barkah et al., 2025) which state that learning innovations in the era of the Merdeka Curriculum are adaptive, contextual, and responsive to students' characteristics Tondeur et al. (2020) also emphasize that the integration of technology into differentiated instruction can

help enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the learning process.

The novelty of this study lies in the use of diagnostic assessment as the primary basis for designing differentiation in content, process, products, and the learning environment for social studies at the junior high school level. Unlike previous studies, which have largely focused on the effectiveness of differentiated instruction on learning outcomes, this study demonstrates how diagnostic assessment is systematically used to map students' learning needs and serves as the foundation for instructional decision-making. These findings provide practical contributions for social studies teachers in implementing differentiated instruction that is more targeted, inclusive, and aligned with the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum. Further research is recommended to test the effectiveness of this model on a larger scale using experimental or mixed-methods designs (Creswell & Creswell, 2021).

Table 1 Summary of Key Findings on the Implementation of Differentiated Learning

Research Aspect	Main Findings
Diagnostic Assessment	Identifies students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles
Content Differentiation	Learning materials adjusted to students' ability levels
Process Differentiation	Discussion, projects, simulations, educational games
Product Differentiation	Posters, videos, presentations, concept maps
Learning Environment	Flexible, inclusive, collaborative classrooms
Impact	Increased participation, confidence, engagement, and motivation

Research Aspect	Main Findings
Innovation	Digital learning media, tiered worksheets, project choices

The findings demonstrate that differentiated instruction innovation is not limited to varying instructional activities but represents a comprehensive instructional management process beginning with diagnostic assessment and continuing through instructional planning, implementation, and evaluation. Teachers function as instructional designers who continuously adapt learning experiences according to students' changing needs. These findings strengthen constructivist learning theory and educational management perspectives emphasizing adaptive instructional leadership, data-informed decision-making, and learner-centered curriculum implementation.

D. Conclusions

This study concludes that diagnostic assessment-based differentiated instruction effectively accommodates students' diverse learning needs within the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Diagnostic assessment functions as the primary foundation for designing differentiated content, instructional processes, learning products, and classroom environments that are adaptive to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. The implementation of differentiated instruction contributes to increased student participation, engagement, motivation, confidence, and meaningful learning experiences. Theoretically, this study enriches the literature on differentiated instruction by emphasizing diagnostic assessment as a strategic component of instructional innovation rather than merely an evaluation instrument. Practically, the findings provide guidance for teachers in designing more inclusive, adaptive, and student-centered learning. Future research is recommended to involve multiple

schools and employ mixed-method or experimental designs to examine the broader effectiveness of this instructional model.

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